Divided Left Questions SLA

The Symbionese Liberation Army has created serious conflicts in the radical Left. This was made evident in three letters received by The Chronicle yesterday.

A News Analysis

The letters included one purporting to be from SLA defectors who said they have split from the "army" because of its devotion to violence and an inference of "egotistical" leadership that makes "secret" decisions for the SLA.

Another letter was a lengthy analysis of the SLA by Bernardine Dohrn. She wrote on behalf of the Weather Underground, the recognized veterans and virtual inventors of the U.S. left wing underground. This group has not been heard from in nearly six months.

The letter indicated that Weatherpeople are reluctant to condemn the SLA, but are at least in some conflict with its tactics.

The conflict was much more apparent in a third letter which came from people who were once members of Venceremos in San Mateo county. Venceremos, a Marxist-Leninist organization committed to revolution, disbanded last year.

Its former members said, in the letter to The Chronicle that "in effect, if not in intent, they (the SLA) are anti-working class, anti-revolutionary, anti-communist. If the SLA did not exist, the police would have to invent them.

"Objectively," the letter from the former Venceremos people said, "they are playing the role of provocateurs."

The heart of the disagreement discussed in all three letters is the SLA's admitted responsibility for the murder of Oakland School Superintendent Marcus Foster last November 6.

The unsigned letter claiming to be from ex-members of the SLA said the writers had joined the organization in August and then quickly found contradictions in what they had hoped would be a new and serious revolutionary organization that would replace the disarrayed elements of the New Left.

"It quickly became apparent to us," the writers said, "that the Symbionese Federation was not fundamentally opposed to the errors of the Left we had known, but was rather the culmination of all its defects.

"The process of the organization was totally top-down. The War Council made decisions in secret and the members were expected to obey orders without question, just as in a capitalist army.

". . . the 'Army' came to be seen as the chief agent of the revolution. We began to suspect that the War Council was manipulated either by some local right-wing organization or the CIA itself. The secret decision to kill Marcus Foster, and its execution, confirmed our suspicions."

Bernardine Dohrn, a Weather fugitive who is still sought by the FBI, expressed support and recognition for the "political effect" of what the SLA is demanding for the ransom of Patricia Hearst, she made it clear that Weatherpeople, too, apparently find a tortuous contradiction in the murder of Foster.

"We do not comprehend the execution of Marcus Foster," Miss Dohrn wrote, "and respond very soberly to the death of a Black person who was not a recognized enemy of his people. But it is wrong to allow such questions to become a grant of immunity to enemies and executioners of the oppressed.

"The system always holds that its massive violence is legal and moral and that revolutionary violence by the people is illegal and outrageous. It is the opposite that is true."

It is that question itself which has stirred this historic debate raging in the Left.

"All the reforms we fought for in the 60's had failed, or been taken back, and were inadequate to start with," the message from the ex-SLA member said. "All of us were frustrated with the divided factions of the so-called revolutionary left.

"That movement was based on guilt, on always making the revolution for somebody else, in the name of somebody else's oppression, supposedly greater than our own."

What was popularly called the "New Left" was in reality probably finished by the end of last year. In its place, the most dedicated radical activists were seeking a political identity to assure a permanent revolutionary base in the U.S.

None of the older leaders was trusted by the more hot blooded of the new revolutionaries.

"The Symbionese people we contacted were self-disciplined, serious and efficient revolutionary cadres, willing to risk anything in order to gain everything," the letter from the ex-SLA member said.

"When we joined in the first founding conference of the Symbionese Federation last June, we thought we had found a place for ourselves in a revolutionary organization that was on its way beyond the Left, old and 'new.'"

If the letter is, in fact, from ex-SLA members who are now "in hiding . . . expecting reprisals from the SLA," it is obvious they were bitterly disappointed in their hopes.

"Some of the brothers and sisters asserted that all that was necessary was to put yourself into situations where your ass would get kicked and armed bravery would do the rest," the letter said. "Some of the brothers and sisters were complaining about the lack of democracy within the organization. The justification for this was alway that we were in a 'state of war.'"

Confusion remains about that "state of war"

Miss Dohrn, of the Weather Underground wrote in her letter: "Beware of the familiar phrases used against every kind of revolutionary action. 'It's premature,' 'it turns people off' (some people), 'it brings down repression.' The same words are used to attack sit-ins, draft-card burnings, urban rebellions, the struggle of women, G.I. revolts or occupations of institutions.

"Whether or not any of this is literally true, the important thing about revolutionary action is its political effect, its direction, what it teaches and changes and strengthens."

"Revolution, not fascism, is the main trend in the world today," says the letter from ex-Venceremos members. "But the way to make sure of that is not through isolated acts of terror like those of the SLA, but by building a strong disciplined party of the working class — a new, revolutionary Communist Party.

"And the first task of that party will be to expose anarchists like the SLA and labor misleaders like Meany and the present Communist Party of the USA." And, said the letter from ex-SLA members:

"The brothers and sisters of the SLA are on the wrong road, a road that leads to sacrifice and defeat. Political power does not come primarily out of the barrel of a gun, but out of control over the means of production and out of new social relationships." But Miss Dohrn didn't back off her own commitment to underground guerrilla action as a means of promoting the revolution. She indicates debate comes down to whether the time for revolution has yet arrived.

Her letter said, "Committed political workers will be criticizing and discussing the Hearst kidnaping for a long time, but we must acknowledge that this audacious intervention has carried forward the basic public questions and starkly dramatized what many have come to understand through their own experience: It will be necessary to organize and to destroy this racist and cruel system."